



Havruta-style Torah study*

In Light of Torah groups

Havruta is related to the Hebrew word for friend, *haver*.

We use the term here to refer to a method of reflecting on scripture which draws from traditional Jewish ideas and practices that emphasize the value of a learning *partnership*.

That is, we find meaning in God's Word when our bible reflection is supported by a process of dialogue and conversation with another seeker of truth and meaning.

"Iron sharpens iron, and one person sharpens the wits of another" (Proverbs 27:17).

"Two are better than one, because they have a good reward for their toil. For if they fall, one will lift up the other; but woe to the one who is alone and falls and does not have another to help. (Ecclesiastes 4:9-10).

*"Torah is only acquired in a group, havurah"
(Babylonian Talmud [BT], Berakhot 63b).*

As you reflect on the text in *havruta*, there are three voices to attend to: you, your partner, and the sacred text. We can add a fourth: a teacher or guide. This could be a person in the room or a Torah commentary on your table.

One Talmudic text (Avot 1.6) emphasizes that one should always study with a friend and a teacher.

Six elements of *havruta*-style learning:*

1. Listening. Listen deeply to the text and to each other. Be attentive to what your partner is communicating. Stay silent enough to really hear the voice of the other, rather than simply waiting for the next opportunity to speak. Active listening can also involve asking clarifying questions.

2. Articulating. Take turns verbalizing your thoughts. Avoid making definitive statements too early in the process. Stay close to the text, build upon ideas and allow space for fresh points of view.

3. Wondering. While we seek to draw some conclusions, remember that multiple interpretations can emerge from any one text. Even if by the end of your session you are leaning towards a certain view, maintain an open mind and heart to the world of imagination and possibility, knowing that there are infinite depths to God's Word to be pondered.

4. Focusing. While staying open to various paths of enquiry, we should not get 'lost' in them. Harness the discussion to focus on a particular aspect of the text or to explore a certain angle of interpretation. Strike a balance between 'wandering' and focusing.

5. Supporting. Support and encourage your *havruta* partner in his/her enquiry, by affirming efforts, interacting with ideas, and asking questions that might urge the other to greater clarity of thought.

6. Challenging. *Havruta* involves challenging one another... asking questions that call the other to rethink their position, pointing to inconsistencies in their argument, proposing an alternative interpretation. This should be done with love and respect. Envisaged here is not a style of debate where the purpose is to 'defeat' the other, but one which brings out the joy and excitement of mutual learning.

*The author gratefully acknowledges the assistance of Mark David Walsh, "Reflections on my Teaching: An Introduction to Havruta Style Learning" (IFRS Faculty Lecture Series, Manila, 19 Aug 2011), used with permission. His article is available at www.lightoftorah.net/getstarted and recommended reading for Light of Torah group facilitators.

The six aspects of *havruta*-style learning reflect Orit Kent's 'core *havruta* practices' as discussed by Walsh.

